

HOW TO SOLICIT FEEDBACK FROM A GROUP

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Speak openly, respectfully and
persuasively, when it matters.

YOUR CHALLENGE

Even in private, people are reluctant to tell leaders what they really think, for a range of reasons, including power imbalances, fear, and embarrassment. Most people are reluctant to tell those with power over paychecks what they really need to hear.

How many meandering meetings have you sat through, where the boss simply wanted to “get everyone together to discuss something”? People end up checking email, or texting each other under the table, and often leave feeling they wasted their time, while the leader who called the meeting because s/he wanted help with a problem, may end up with more ideas, but no insight into the right decision.

Many leaders are also unaware that when they simply ask a group, “I want to hear what you think,” they inadvertently cause people to presume there’s a right answer and they spend their time trying to figure out what the leader wants to hear.

**“A LEADER’S JOB IS TO GET IT RIGHT,
NOT TO BE RIGHT.” -DAN KAPLAN**

USE A PROCESS

If you face a big decision and want the best advice, perspective, and ideas from your team, here's a process to get honest, open feedback, even from reluctant groups.

This process is a combination of methods from, Crucial Conversations, Fierce Conversations, and best practices about decision-making.



Image by [Christina Morillo](#)

1.

PREPARE

A common mistake made by leaders who just “get everyone together to discuss” a topic is that they haven’t done the work required to get clear, actionable advice from a group in a way that both focuses people’s attention and makes them feel free to speak their minds about what’s really going on.

The work done prior to a meeting determines the quality of the meeting’s output, which is why Amazon requires employees who call a large meeting to take the time up front to cogently write out the issue, often in very long letters.

We will be taking a similar tactic, which may create more work up front, but can lead to dramatically more insightful, complete, and helpful information needed to make big decisions with more confidence.

**“GIVE ME SIX HOURS TO CHOP DOWN A TREE,
AND I’LL SPEND THE FIRST FOUR SHARPENING
THE AX.” -ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

WHO DECIDES, AND HOW?

Let's make everyone's life easier and clarify, up front, how the decision will be made.

Very often leaders, and therefore their teams, don't have a clear sense of the decision-making process during a discussion, creating endless circular conversation.

This step alone can clarify your thinking, answer part of the "why are we here" question, and reduce status transactions during discussions.

According to the seminal book *Crucial Conversations*, there are four ways to make a decision:

1. **Command** – Decide without involvement or input from others.
2. **Consult** – Invite others to provide input, then you decide.
3. **Vote** – Discuss options and then call for a vote.
4. **Consensus** – Discuss the issue until everyone agrees to one course of action.

Each method has its uses and strengths, but option two (Consult) most often results in the best decision with the most efficient use of resources.

If you're unsure which to choose, [this post](#) has a good summary of the pros and cons of each method in various scenarios.

SO, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

In a “let’s just get together to discuss” meeting, much of the time is spent simply attempting to help the group clarify an issue. It’s like only drinking the froth of a cappuccino and never getting to the coffee. Where’s the caffeine? The best ideas are below the fluff, deep inside the smart people you have around you.

Take the time to answer each of these questions in writing.

THE ISSUE IS...

Briefly, what is the heart of the problem? Is it a challenge, opportunity, decision, strategy, or a recurring issue that needs to be fixed?

IT IS SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE...

What’s at stake? Income, expenses, people, products, service, customers, or something else? What is the future impact if this issue is not resolved?

MY/OUR IDEAL OUTCOME IS...

What specific results do I/we want? If I/we get this right, who or what will be affected, and how? What good things will occur?

RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION...

Use bullet points to summarize how, when, why, and where the issue started, who the key players are, what forces are at work, and the issue’s current status.

WHAT I/WE HAVE DONE UP TO THIS POINT...

What successful and unsuccessful steps have been taken so far, with what results?

THE OPTION I AM CONSIDERING...

What option(s) am I/are we considering? If I had to choose right now, without input from the group, what option would I choose and why?

HOW THE DECISION WILL BE MADE...

Describe the decision making process (discussed above).

THE HELP I WANT FROM THE GROUP IS...

Explain clearly what you want from the group. What does success from this meeting look like? Do you want to know what you're missing; to see what they see; alternative solutions, consequences, or sources of information you may have missed; or an honest critique of a current plan?

“A PROBLEM NAMED IS A PROBLEM SOLVED.” -SUSAN SCOTT

When you have clearly articulated these items for your team, you elevate their jumping-off point, making the quality of their insights, advice, and feedback much more informed and helpful to your decision.

Feel free to use the **Issue Preparation Document** template at the end of this eBook.

2.

FACILITATE

Now that we have learned how to prepare for a meeting to solicit honest feedback from a group, let's turn our attention to selecting participants, setting expectations, and facilitating a conversation where people can openly, honestly share with you what they think, and help you make the most informed decision you can.

**“LEADERSHIP IS DEFINED BY RESULTS,
NOT ATTRIBUTES.” - PETER DRUCKER**

WHO DO YOU INVITE?

By calling a meeting to ask for your team's help with a problem, you decide what to talk about and how to structure the conversation, but who you invite will determine the quality of the feedback, advice, and perspectives you get.

If you're a pioneer, preparing to lead a horse-drawn wagon train across a young, unknown America, who do you want in your wagon?

No one person in your organization or on your team has all the answers, and you probably know people's general views, so don't just invite the usual people.

Ask attendees if they know of any others who may be potentially helpful. By seeking diversity of backgrounds and experiences, you will be able to see the problem from more angles.

Who has a front row seat to the problem? Who is affected by it? Rather than looking for people with the most experience, invite people with the best vantage points to the problem. Maybe your customers should be represented?

Keep the size manageable, but err on the side of inclusion. If someone is likely to leave the meeting without a takeaway that directly impacts their work or lives, their time is probably better spent working on something else.

SENDING THE INVITATION

Once you have the group defined, send your invitation and Issue Preparation Document with enough advance notice for participants to review and prepare.

Make it clear you want them to have read everything well in advance, so they can focus on helping you with the decision.

Be sure to let them know how you will make the decision.

Tell them you will begin promptly and expect them to arrive on time (and actually do it).

Close your invitation by letting them know that you look forward to hearing their perspective, which will help set the expectation for open, honest conversation.

FACILITATE

People are often reluctant to say what they really think in groups, especially in front of leadership, so how can you facilitate this conversation in a way that people will feel encouraged to speak their truths, uncovering your brain trust's best ideas, honest insights, and useful feedback?

START WITH THE RIGHT INTENT

Before you speak, set your intent for how you will act in what may be an uncomfortable conversation.

Your intent will drive your demeanor. An intent such as “I will be sincere and inquisitive so I can get their honest perspectives” will help you keep your cool if you hear things you don't like.

If you're the kind of person who instinctively reacts, you may want to write down and keep your intent in view. Nothing will shut down open discussion more quickly than the leader rebutting ideas from the group.

START OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT

Open with gratitude, expectations, and objectives.

Thank everyone and ask them to put away laptops, phones, and pens. Tell them this is a conversation that requires they be fully present.

REVIEW THE ISSUE

Take five minutes to talk them through the Issue Preparation Document, then pass out a copy after you're finished. Get people focused on the issue, not a piece of paper. Stress why this issue is significant (the second item on the Issue Preparation Document).

When discussing the last item, what help you want from the group, reiterate that you invited them here to influence your thinking, and therefore the decision or outcome. This is vital to getting full participation.

Tell them you want to know what they're seeing that is different from what you're seeing.

With sincerity, ask for their help preventing the future described in the Issue Preparation Document, what's at stake if nothing changes. (This will help prevent daydreaming and texting under the table).

MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS UP TO SPEED AND ENGAGED

Set a timer and take questions for 15 minutes. If you take more time than this, some of the people brimming with ideas may lose steam. Also, endless questions may be a strategy for delaying having to tell you what they really think.

Some participants may feel they never have enough information and are still asking questions, to which you can simply say, "Let's move from questions to answers. What are your thoughts on the topic?"

FACILITATE HONEST, OPEN DISCUSSION

Now, your job is to be quiet and listen, perhaps the hardest part.

At this point, you may have to fight the temptation to defend, explain, and tamp down on direct or perceived criticism of your proposed solution, past decisions, or leadership. How you act at this point will determine the quality of the information you receive.

Ask for pushback, perspectives, and problems.

Here's some language you can use, from Susan Scott, creator of this process: "I shared what I feel is the right way to go, the right course of action, and I suspect that some of you may see it differently. If you do, I'd like to hear it. I know my enthusiasm may make it hard to challenge me, but my job is to make the best possible decision for the organization, not to persuade you of my viewpoint."

At the Sundance Film Festival, founder Robert Redford begins meetings by saying, "I am inviting you to influence me. I want to be different when this meeting is over."

MAKE IT SAFE FOR EVERYONE TO SPEAK

Not everyone will want to speak. If they haven't, ask them directly. ("Jen, we haven't heard from you yet. What do you think?")

If you sense that someone is scared to speak up, don't let anyone off the hook.

If someone says, "I don't know," push back with, "What would you add if you did have something to add?"

Monitor your tone and demeanor throughout. Be sincere and inquisitive. Resist the temptation to defend your idea or past performance. In the moments you feel your body reacting, refocus on your intent.

If you hear yourself knee-jerk reacting with phrases like, “I hear you Ben, but...” what everyone in the room will hear is: “Fooled you! I don’t really want your ideas and actually don’t care what you think.”

Instead, simply say, “OK, Tell me more.”

WRAPPING UP

After you have heard from everyone, ask everyone to write down what they would do if they were in your position. Ask for no side talking.

When done, go around the room and ask everyone to read what they wrote.

After each, all you say is “thank you.” (And enjoy the brief moment of them having to be in your shoes, taking a stand, acting, deciding. They have just gained some perspective on the pressures you are under.)

Close by summarizing, “This is what I heard you say...Did I miss anything?” They will appreciate being heard.

Have them put their names on their papers before giving them to you, so you can follow up if needed.

Thank them for their time and intelligence. End with gratitude.

FOLLOWING UP

Once you have made your decision, let them know what it is.

DON'T WAIT

The cost of putting off big decisions is that everyone loses.

Use this process to collect the best information you can to inform a big decision.

**“THE NEW LEADER IS A FACILITATOR,
NOT AN ORDER GIVER.” - JOHN NAISBITT**



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Issue Preparation Document

The issue is...

It is significant because...

My/Our ideal outcome is...

Relevant background information...

What I/we have done up to this point...

The option I am considering...

How the decision will be made...

The help I want from the group is...

